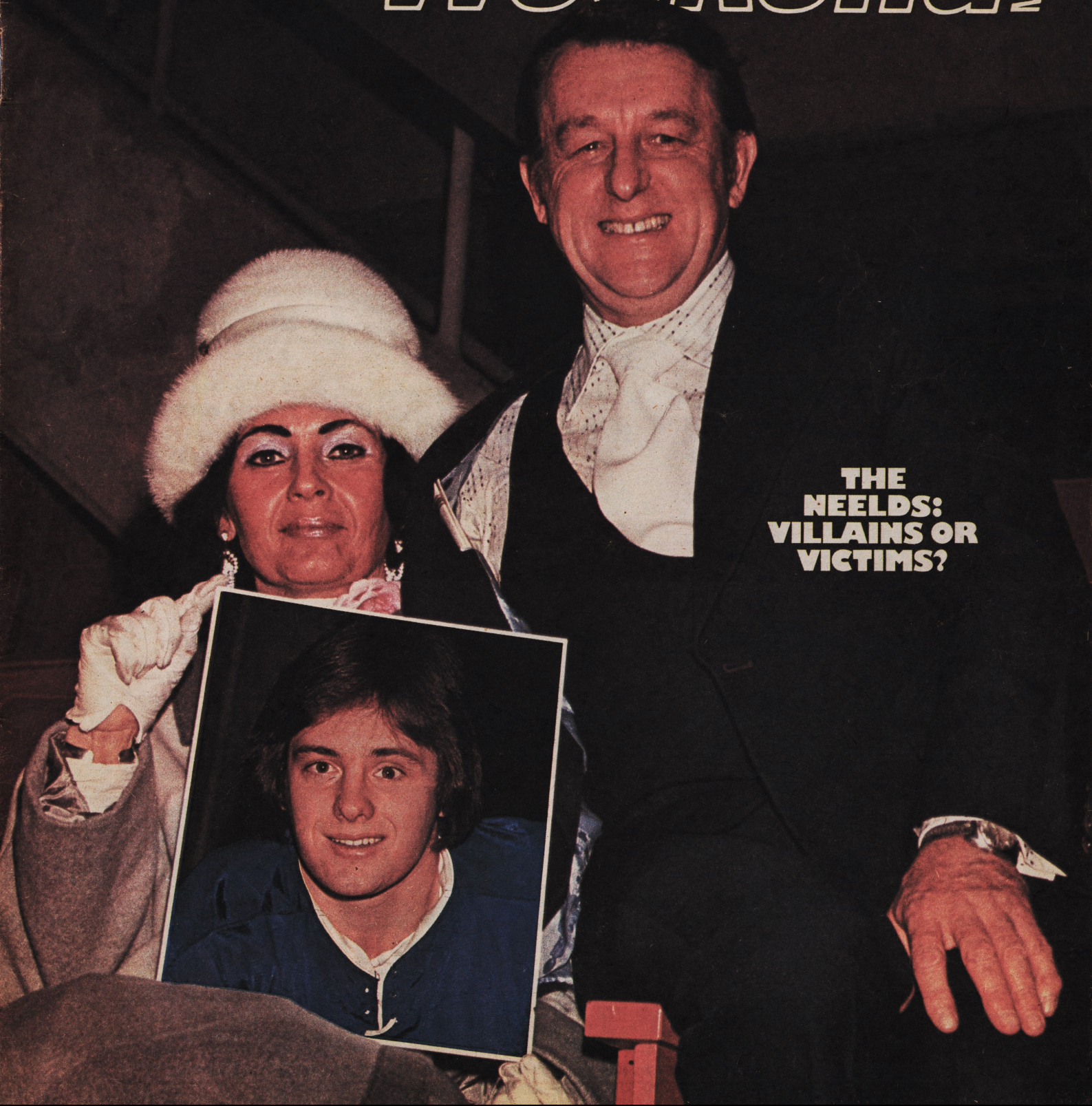


PAGE 4
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OUT OF HIS LEAGUE

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**THE
NEELDS:
VILLAINS OR
VICTIMS?**

OUT OF HIS LEAGUE

How Greg Neeld's grip on hockey became hockey's grip on him

By Margaret Drury Gane / Photography, including cover, by Dan Gordon

"YOU'RE ONLY as good as your last shift," says Greg Neeld, who may now wish he hadn't been sent out for the last shift of a scrappy Junior hockey game against the Kitchener Rangers in December, 1973. The Toronto Marlboros were losing. With just a few minutes left to play, Neeld skated low by the boards to beat out the Rangers' Dave Maloney for the puck. Maloney's stick flew out to hook, caught Neeld's left eye, and the Marlboro defenceman dropped his gloves and stick to the ice immediately. Again and again Neeld yelled to his teammates that he could not see, he could not see.

At 18 years of age, Greg Neeld had the world neatly wrapped around the blade of his hockey stick. Hockey wasn't just his game, it was his life. And the irresistible fringe benefits he wanted — clothes, cars, the spotlight — would come, too, because the big leagues make most worldly things possible. For Greg, nothing less than the big leagues would do. On the strength of his potential, it seemed he wouldn't have to settle for less.

Over six feet tall and 190 pounds, Neeld was handsome, with a cleft chin and the kind of wide white smile that drew a following of hockey groupies. He had confidence enough for a whole team, and who could blame him? One coach called him "another Bobby Orr," and scouts were rating him the top defenceman in Junior hockey. Teams haggled and squabbled to get him, heady stuff for a teenager but, in this case, even more mind-dazzling for the parents, who frequently flew from their Vancouver home to watch him play. "He had so much going for him," says his mother. "What happened was a nightmare."

The injury was worse than anyone thought at first. After a week's wait, the doctors at the Toronto General Hospital knew nothing could save an eye that was irreparably smashed, and it took a three-hour operation to remove it.

Two years later Greg Neeld sits out more games than he plays with the Toronto Toros. That's why he's often sent to play with the minor league Buffalo Norsemen, where he can keep the leg muscles strong and, he hopes, work himself into good enough condition to stay in the World Hockey Association. But it was the National

Hockey League's Buffalo Sabres he wanted, and that dream appears to have faded, despite Neeld's stubborn efforts to make it a reality. The efforts have set a precedent. Though others have been blinded in one eye playing hockey, none have accused the NHL of conspiring to prevent them from becoming professional hockey players. Last September, the Neelds filed a \$4.5 million anti-trust suit against the NHL, saying just that. It is an action Norman Neeld says will "make it possible for other players maimed in a game to prove their worth before they are disqualified." He and Greg have designed a helmet which they insist provides excellent protection against further injury.

But few people think the present rules will be altered to allow Neeld's entry into the NHL. The best of helmets, they point out, can come off during a game or a fight and expose the good eye to injury and the player to total blindness. No one wants to be responsible for that, no matter how safe Neeld says his helmet is. So Greg Neeld continues to shuffle between Toronto and Buffalo, an all too visible victim of the violence everybody claims to hate. His battle to be counted equal makes him an embarrassment to league higher-ups; Neeld is supposed to melt away, and he will not melt.

His parents say privately that "the NHL thing is a dead issue." Neither talks much about Greg's future in hockey, and his mother in particular seems to nurse a resentment against fates she either misread or ignored. "I'm a great believer in astrology, you know. I've always kept charts on all my sons. The danger to Greg showed up, as a matter of fact, not long before the injury." She takes little comfort in the thought that there was probably nothing she could have done. "I wish you could have seen him before. I used to say that Gregory was poetry in motion, like Secretariat. He was so beautiful. It breaks my heart."

From Vancouver, the Neelds' home town, have come some of the most unpleasant stories of interference, profanity and intimidation ever attributed to one hockey family. Al Davidson, a Vancouver broadcaster, says that people who knew the Neelds resented them so much that he decided to compile the

complaints into a program that criticized domineering, pushy parents.

It bitterly attacked the Neelds and resulted in a defamation of character suit against Davidson, although he told the Neelds what he intended to do and offered Mrs. Neeld unedited air time for rebuttal. She accepted, and read a prayer aloud. Then the Neelds sued.

Listening to Davidson's words, the immediate reaction is deep sympathy for the Neelds — especially since the broadcast, in a display of bad taste bordering on vengefulness, was aired on the same day young Neeld's eye was removed in the Toronto hospital. "It was like being kicked hard while we were already down," says Mrs. Neeld. On air, Davidson said that "the Neelds won't go down in any popularity contests with fellow parents around here. To say that most of them hated the Neelds' guts would be an understatement, because they some time ago figured they had another Bobby Orr in the making, and they played it that way." Today, though Davidson regrets the timing of the broadcast and admits to overstatement, he believes the judge's summing up "says it all."

In the judge's opinion, the Neelds seemed obsessed with hockey, so much so that they showed complete indifference to others. "To them, the sport was more like a business," he said, "and the final goal of NHL stardom appeared to justify any sacrifice. They countered with profanity and abuse rather than discussion with coaches and others." Calling Jean Neeld the prime motivator and her husband a willing follower, he awarded the Neelds the meagre sum of \$750. "Damages must bear some relation to the reputation of the plaintiff," he explained. "The higher the reputation, the higher the damages."

This cool rebuke resulted from the testimony of 10 witnesses who had to be subpoenaed, says Davidson, because they feared Mrs. Neeld's considerable wrath. They told stories of her habitual use of foul language when talking to referees, coaches and parents, and of her attempts to run onto the ice during games and to climb into the penalty box with her son. The North Shore Winter Club has banned the entire family for life because of what manager Fred Boates calls Mrs. Neeld's physical and verbal abuse of other members.

Perhaps with some justification, the Neelds say the whole murky exposure was maliciously blown up out of proportion "as a chance to put us down."

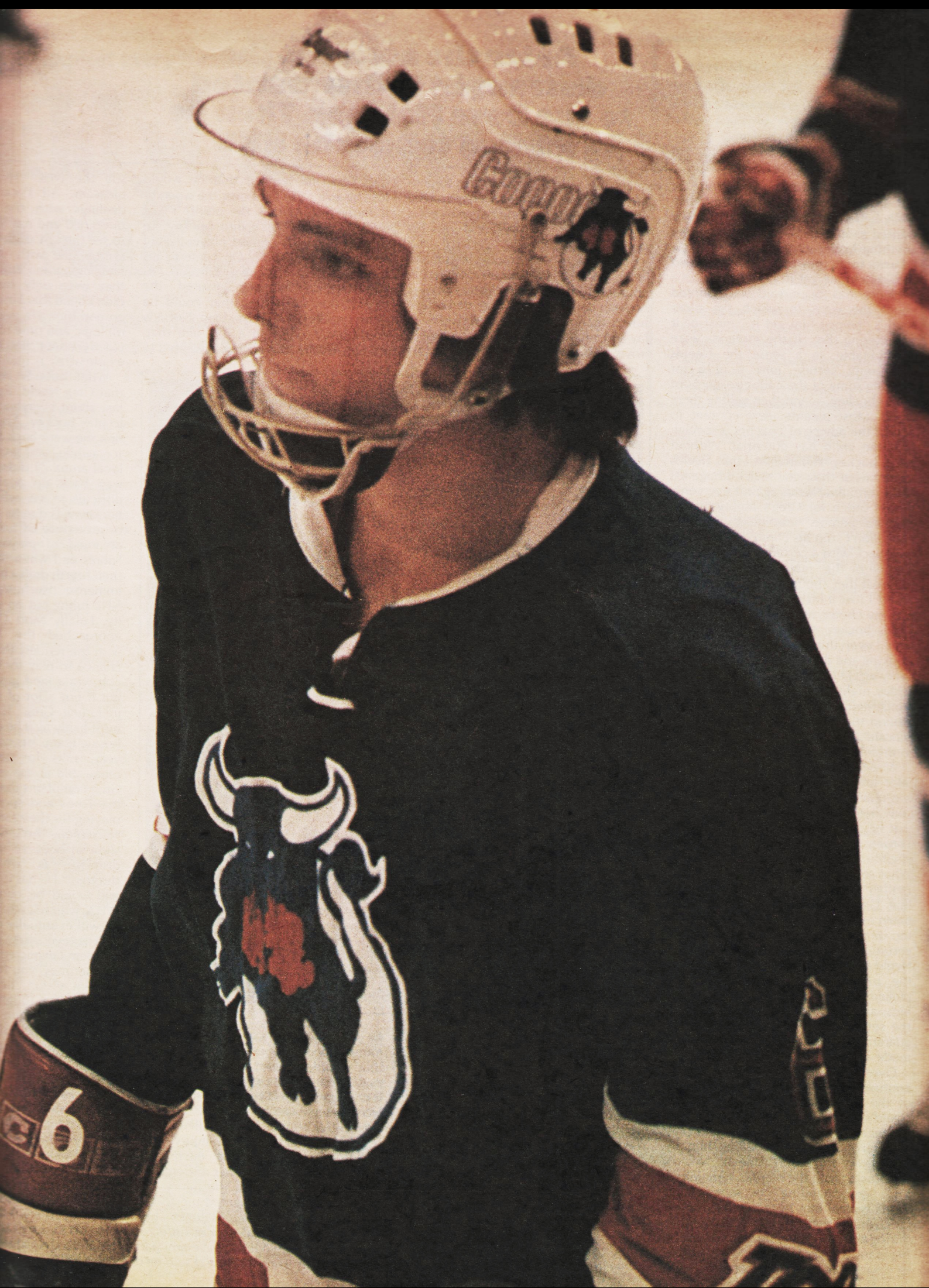
"Sure I've used a few swear words in my time," says Mrs. Neeld, "Who hasn't? They get mad because I tell them the truth right to their faces, and they don't like that." She would really like to get into club board rooms, where people have the power to "make changes."

Both Neelds insist that all they ever wanted was to "give the boys the character, stamina and good attitudes" that they thought developed from playing hockey. And there is strong evidence that they saw themselves as a family perpetually together, bonded by common interest, shared glory and lots of money. Perhaps in the confusion of aims the ambition has obscured the loftier purposes. What is truly startling is the fact that Greg, the victim of ugly home-town feelings towards an occasionally embarrassing family, has surmounted these drawbacks so well. He has become wary of the media. He says he loves his family. And what he has managed to salvage from the murk and muddle of the Vancouver years is not bitterness, but courage.

By usual standards, Greg Neeld came late to organized hockey. Many parents have their hoped-for Hulls suited up and competing before they've learned to read, and these wobbly-legged miniatures weave onto the ice to cries of "Take him out! Hit him!" Some of the highest praise a peewee player can hear is "You got a piece of him!" Neeld was denied this uplifting experience because his parents didn't suggest organized hockey until he was 11 years old. "I wasn't all that enthusiastic about the idea at first," he says, "but my dad thought it was good for kids, so I went along with it."

Nothing much happened until Greg was 13. "It just seemed to come together all at once," says Greg. "My co-ordination improved. I began skating and stickhandling well. I hadn't scored a goal all season. Then suddenly, in the last game, I scored three goals and three assists. From then on, I just kept getting better." He insists that his parents had no plans for him at the time. "It started out as a way of keeping

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After the accident the distraught father wanted to sue Dave Maloney. Then he wanted to sue the NHL

us busy, I guess, strictly a good thing for our attitudes and our character. They really believed that. But when I knew I wanted to be a professional more than anything in the world, and they knew I'd work for it, they took over. They said they'd help me get it."

Plenty has been said and printed about the ways in which the older Neelds "helped him get it," most of it unflattering. But, if the methods were questionable, in a sense the Neelds were only getting into trouble for spotting some of the callous aspects of minor hockey — and then yelling them aloud. Most parents seem content to accept the advice of coaches, especially if the child has potential. Without prior hockey experience, the Neelds turned what they saw as "child against child" into the Neelds against everyone. It says much for Greg's ability on ice that his parents' continuous interference didn't stop his climb. He seems to look back with a certain remoteness, as if none of that really mattered. "They did what they thought was right for me, and if I lost a little of my childhood, it was my choice as much as theirs." For Greg, hockey soon took precedence over everything. Experiments with smoking and drinking and having a date every weekend had no appeal. "In fact, Friday night was great as far as I was concerned. With all the kids hanging around the plaza, or seeing a show, I was able to have the rink pretty much to myself."

When Neeld was 15, his father, a pilot for Air Canada, decided his son was ready for bigger stakes, and was so convinced of Greg's eventual success that he planned to move the family to Toronto so that the boy would be eligible for Junior status in Ontario. What seems a little sad is the fact that neither Jean nor Norman Neeld saw that Greg was becoming as much a pawn as a promise. By 1972, they were too dazzled by the publicity Greg was getting. One coach stated flatly that if Neeld and Mark Howe were available in the midget draft, Neeld would be picked first. Teams were fighting to get him, and the hassles were covered in the sports pages. If noise and flattery guaranteed stardom, Greg Neeld had it made at 16.

Overblown publicity and a pair of confused parents scenting the rewards of the big time combined to inflate Neeld's ego. Always a moody person, he began to lose perspective and play the star everyone was telling him he was. Lynn Jorgenson, one of Neeld's teammates with the Marlies, remembers him "grandstanding" in a way that didn't endear him to teammates. "He'd do push-ups right on the ice, sometimes during a game. Wheeling around like the big man, you know?" On ice, according to coach George Armstrong, he was

tough, fast and aggressive, but Jorgenson says these qualities weren't saved for the opposition. Neeld began to get a reputation for rough treatment of his own teammates.

Bobby Baun, Neeld's coach with the Toros, says Neeld's personality is the natural result of pushing young players too soon and too fast. "They don't have time to mature. It's as if they're kids one day and adults the next. The pressure to prove themselves is speeded up by

utes when he learned that he would lose his eye. "But I got over the worst of it fairly fast. What's the point? I just decided I'd get back into hockey, to prove I was still a good player." Paul Henderson and Bobby Orr came to his hospital room to cheer him up. Al Eagleson arrived and assured the Neelds that everything that could be done for Greg would be done. Nobody could put a price on a loss like that, says Eagleson, "But we really wanted to

sue the NHL. Things got very unpleasant. All I can say is that my dealings with the parents were so one-sided and nasty that I wasn't sorry to see the last of them. Anybody could sympathize with their grief, but by hanging on and drawing the agony out, they were only hurting the boy. He didn't need that kind of ruckus going on around him. He needed support based on logic and time to get well and think clearly about his future. I think the whole affair is really sad."

What nobody really expected was that Greg Neeld, against the advice of just about everybody, would still want to play hockey. After a swift recuperation, he went back home to Vancouver for awhile, and worked out alone in a local arena. "I didn't mind working my way back up again," he says. It is difficult to say whether his return to hockey was due to ability or sentiment, or a mixture of both. Neeld had long dreamed of playing for the Buffalo Sabres and when they selected him as their fourth draft choice, it gave him an immense psychological lift. But the NHL ruling put an end to that possibility. Finally Mort Greenberg, a friend, approached the Toros management with the request that Neeld be given a chance to play for them.

It was a kind gesture and it worked, but it put a lot of people on the spot, including Greg. If he can't perform, most likely he'll be relegated to a minor league team. His contract, at \$30,000 a year, runs for three years and is renewable at the end of one year. Yet Greg complains that he rarely plays for the Toros and spends too much time playing for their farm team, the Buffalo Norsemen. The tension is beginning to show in bouts of moodiness which he dismisses as "what everybody goes through." He has lowered his aims now, and would be content to play in the WHA, which is what Bobby Baun hopes he will eventually do.

"His eye isn't anywhere near the problem I expected it to be," says Baun. "Sometimes, you forget he only has 50 percent vision, he's adapted so well. But this is a tough league, and it will take time for him to get himself into shape. He's not quite fast enough for it yet." And what if he can't make it? Baun doesn't want to be the one who says it, but Greg's only option will be the minors, which would be fine if all he ever wanted was just to play hockey. Many people who know Neeld well think that his ego is a greater handicap to him than the loss of an eye, that it has always prevented him from playing great hockey. Probably because people feel he's had enough problems, they tend not to level with him.

In his personal life he seems genuinely spoiled. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Toronto apartment he

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those big, tempting contracts. God, what we just hoped for by the ages of 24 or 25 these kids are getting at 18."

No one will ever know just how good Greg Neeld might have been with more time and two good eyes. But indications are that the comparison with Bobby Orr was premature. "Players like that," says Armstrong, "are one in a million. I thought Greg was much better than average, but not unusual. I just don't know how anybody can really predict that sort of thing. And if they could, maybe they shouldn't. Maybe it isn't doing the game or the kids any favors."

Neeld admits he cried for five min-

utes when he learned that he would lose his eye. "But I got over the worst of it fairly fast. What's the point? I just decided I'd get back into hockey, to prove I was still a good player." Paul Henderson and Bobby Orr came to his hospital room to cheer him up. Al Eagleson arrived and assured the Neelds that everything that could be done for Greg would be done. Nobody could put a price on a loss like that, says Eagleson, "But we really wanted to

His parents may have pushed too hard in the name of love. Jean Neeld says, "We always seem to be the villains"

now calls home. Actually, very few homes would provide the kind of service Neeld gets there, and they certainly wouldn't do it without pay. Yet until lately, the Lawrence family didn't seem to want anything from Greg; it was as if he were doing them a favor by staying there rent free. He has a recently-decorated bedroom complete with red telephone; the Lawrence's daughter, Donna, now sleeps on the couch. He can devour four eggs and half a loaf of bread for breakfast, then demand — and get — steak smothered in mushrooms and mayonnaise for dinner. There are some signs that the family, which has boarded hockey players before, felt such sympathy for Neeld's impairment that they only wanted to make him feel wanted and comfortable. Now that they must cope with a behemoth appetite, a fussy dresser and a guest rather than a boarder, they are having second thoughts about the limits of kindness.

"I'm a miser," Neeld declared cheerfully when I asked him why he didn't have his own place, or at least one shared with another player. "I'm careful with money, except with clothes."

Another possible explanation is that Neeld is not the easiest person to live with. Mort Greenberg, a CBC television cameraman who specializes in hockey coverage, knows the difficulty of coping with Neeld's lackadaisical lifestyle. "He stayed with me for awhile and he nearly drove me nuts. Here's a guy who couldn't get himself up in the morning and expected me to do it. Well, I decided I wasn't doing him a favor by taking that responsibility. One day when he was going to play out of town, he woke up late. So there he was, keeping the team bus waiting while he charged around throwing those fancy suits into a bag, packing his hair dryer — but forgetting his helmet! This was after the accident, too. He had to have the helmet. But he was so used to other people running his life, especially his family, that he was practically helpless on his own. If he could just cut the umbilical cord, step back and cut out the parents, the grandiose schemes, the leaning on other people, and think for himself, then we'd know what Greg was really capable of doing."

If self-indulgence has been a problem for Greg Neeld, self-pity has never been. He took the loss of his eye with extraordinary courage and optimism. He is even able to joke about it. "I can remember sitting in my room in Toronto with my dad, talking. This was before the accident. Just for the heck of it, I put my hand over my right eye, then my left, just wondering what it would be like — the sort of crazy thing you do sometimes. Two weeks later, I didn't have an eye. It's really weird. I'd never been injured playing hockey before

that. It's made me kind of superstitious. I don't put my hand over the good eye now!"

There are signs, too, that he is trying to stand more solidly on his own. Lately Baun has seen an improvement in attitude, and Greg has fought his parents' plea to give up the game. "I told my mother that it was my decision to make, not hers — that if she wanted us to remain friends, she'd just have to accept the fact that I am going to stay

may at last have sensed the futility of turning the role of mother into that of puppeteer. If the Neeld predicament has done nothing else, it has thrown into sharp focus the need for reassessment of what organized minor hockey may be doing to everyone.

There are too many parents and coaches using the word game to describe what they themselves have turned into ritualized warfare. That's bad enough for the average kid, but for the

exclusion of everything else. Superb physical condition is often marred by outdated jock attitudes which preach that virility means bullying, sissies wear helmets and nothing matters as much as winning. Even though the NHL has recently stiffened its penalties against fighting, many hockey executives insist that crowds want tough, brawling games. In the smoke-screen language of officialdom, some of the bloodiest spectacles are referred to as "action," and the horrible fact is that we, too, may believe it is action.

It's significant that Ontario's royal commission on violence in the media is viewing film clips of hockey games as examples of condoned mayhem. And are any of us really surprised that producer Norman Jewison found the blood-lust roar of hockey spectators the ideal sound track for his film about violence, *Rollerball*? Somewhere along the way hockey has lost its innocence and we, no longer satisfied with watching superb technique, encourage brawls. Until we do something, hockey is likely to remain a form of big business entertainment, and players like Greg Neeld will still think that losing an eye is just part of the show.

He sits in the Lawrence's apartment, talking quietly, sometimes taking a moment or two to find the word he wants, giving the impression that he is more at ease in the sweat and swagger of the locker room, where the correct phrase doesn't matter and the talk is always hockey. He makes no self-conscious effort to hide the glass eye. He is still very good-looking and, with traces of the old arrogant confidence, he knows it.

He hasn't mentioned the fact that he was down in Buffalo again. By his reasoning, taking everybody's advice to get out of hockey is "quitting," and going down to the minors is failing. Still, the fact remains that he may have to face a future without hockey, possibly the biggest emotional adjustment of all. But adapting is something Greg Neeld has proven he can do. No one believed he could make the incredibly smooth transition from defenceman to centre, or train the right eye to do the work of two by holding his head on an angle as he skates.

In the face of such persistence, it isn't easy to mention the possibility of a future without hockey. What will he do? Has he any other plans? "I've always thought journalism would be interesting, probably covering sports. All I know is, from now on, I'm out to please me." ◀

Margaret Drury Cane is a Toronto writer. Her most recent article in Weekend Magazine was a profile of Sylvia Fraser.



in hockey."

It seems likely that the immaturity Neeld must overcome can be traced directly back to overzealous parents who pushed too hard in the name of love. They have paid for that with public censure and the trauma of having a son's promising career thwarted. There is some truth in Jean Neeld's bitter statement: "we always seem to be the villains, not the victims." Of the whole family, she has probably caused the strongest resentment and worked the hardest for her children; and that is a sad combination. Strong, confused, ambitious and now deeply hurt, she

exceptional one it may be worse. All the jabber about clean, character-building exercise can be converted into a loner's pursuit of the buck. Over-advised, overprotected, maybe under-educated, he is plummeted toward the ultimate reward — the ice palace of the NHL, where the thought of a million-dollar contract has to be worth any sacrifice.

So maybe we should be questioning those values more carefully. They filter down from the top, not up from the bottom. While there is much huffing about developing other interests, the truth is that hockey is meant to consume the player's energies to the